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AUTHOR Tremain, Karen
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ABSTRACT

This overview of the literature on school district reorganization: (1) cites four reasons for reorganization; (2) gives two statistics on projected declines in student enrollment; (3) presents factors to be considered during the process of closing a school; (4) lists six administrative leadership skills needed during the school closure process; (5) provides an overview of the issue of middle schools versus junior high schools; and (6) offers five elements of a successful reorganization effort which have been learned from past experience. A bibliography of resources on topics covered in this review cites three journal articles and one Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) microfiche document. (DC)

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SCHOOL DISTRICT REORGANIZATION

For a variety of reasons, schools and school districts are being forced to reexamine their organizational structures and to make changes. Some of the reasons cited for reorganization are:

- Changes in student population;
- Changes in allocation of resources;
- A desire to get more education for each tax dollar spent; and
- A move to improve educational quality.

If reorganization is necessary, it is important to keep in mind that planning, commitment and involvement of those affected by the reorganization are key ingredients to success.

MANAGING DECLINE

One of the most compelling reasons for school district reorganization is a decline in student enrollment. The statistics on student population indicate that:

- By 1988, the number of U.S. high school students will have dropped by approximately 3.5 million.
- By 1999, U.S. public elementary and secondary schools will have lost more than 10 million students between 5 and 18 years of age.

Although the figures seem grim, declining enrollment won't spell the end for public education. Public schools are a hearty breed. They will survive, although careful planning will be a necessity.

CLOSING A SCHOOL

Closing a school is a difficult and potentially painful process. If done carefully, however, it doesn't have to tear your community or staff apart. It is important to remember that the major problems of closing a school are human, not educational. When closing a school, remember that job security is of paramount concern to the employees; the welfare of the children is the major concern of parents. Effective leadership can facilitate the process should school closure become necessary. Some of the leadership skills needed are:

- Listening;
- Synthesizing;
- Tolerating ambivalence;
- Being decisive;
- Remaining positive despite conflict and confrontation; and
- Being open, trusting and accepting of opponents.

The school closure process takes from two to five years of advance planning. All concerned community members should have a chance to voice their opinions and make recommendations. Any decision to close a school should be based on objective data including enrollment projections, cost per pupil of operating a building and facility analysis. The school closure process should include the school board, school personnel, citizens committee and outside consultants. With foresight and a positive commitment to the process, school closure will be less painful.

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MIDDLE SCHOOL VS. JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

One question that arises with the issue of reorganization is "Should we have a middle school or a junior high?" Unfortunately, the research literature doesn't provide a clear-cut answer as to which is better.

The transition between elementary and secondary education occurs sometime during the middle years of schooling. There is disagreement over when this transition should begin and end. Students in the middle grades have few uniform characteristics, and their rates of physical and mental maturation vary greatly, which makes a choice of grade organization difficult. Educators have grappled with this problem of optimum grade organization for many years. Junior high schools, consisting of grades seven through nine, were the first approach. Lately, some educators have questioned whether the junior high provides the best environment for these students who are between preadolescence and early adolesence. The middle school, consisting of grades five or six through eight, has been proposed as an alternative.

Many experts question whether grade organization is important. What seems to be of far greater importance is the quality of programs offered. These are the underlying issues in the middle school/junior high controversy:

- Are ninth graders too physically and socially developed to interact with children as young as fifth graders on a daily basis?
- Are fifth and sixth graders emotionally mature enough to handle life with older students?

Since even the experts can't agree, decisions about grade organization need to be determined locally, based on an examination of the issues.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

Declining enrollment and resources have certainly been the major factors in school district reorganization. However, nothing is certain except change, and these phenomena will undoubtedly be reversed. A "baby boomlet" has been predicted, and there is renewed national and state interest in public education. Resources, which have been scarce in the last few years, may once again become readily available to the schools. Whatever issues face the public schools in the future, district reorganization is sure to be brought up again as a potential solution to school problems. Educators have learned from past experience that the elements of a successful reorganization effort include:

- Strong and effective leadership by administrators;
- Input from parents, citizens and community leaders;
- The involvement of teachers and other school staff;
- Consideration of objective data; and
- A willingness on all sides to listen and cooperate.

Karen Tremain
SMERC Information Center

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The following materials are available from the SMERC Information Center. Call 363-5447.

"Administrative Leadership in School Closures." *NASSP Bulletin*, November 1980, pp. 21-26. (6 pages)

"Sixteen Questions to Ask - And Answer - Before You Close a Small School." *American School Board Journal*, April 1978, pp. 38-39. (2 pages)

"How to Learn to Manage Decline in Your School System." *American School Board Journal*, July 1978, pp. 36-38. (3 pages)

The Optimum Setting for the Early Adolescent: Junior High or Middle School. Philip Schoo, 1973. (ED 86 907; 1 microfiche)

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